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PROGRAM The Today Show

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GARRICK UTLEY: Now here is a who's who which may not seem to make very much sense. David Bruce, the first U.S. Ambassador to China, among other things; CIA Director William Casey; film director John Ford; former CIA Director Allen Dulles; three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Archibald MacLeish. Now, what do they all have in common? Well, during the Second World War they all served in the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS, a fledgling intelligence agency under the direction of war hero William Donovan, otherwise known as Wild Bill Donovan, as in "Wild Bill Donovan: The Last Hero." That's the title of a new book just out by Anthony Cave Brown. And Mr. Brown is here this morning to talk to us about Bill Donovan, along with William Colby, former Director of the CIA.

You gentlemen know Wild Bill well. Tell me, here is a man who was a very successful lawyer, a prominent socialite, a war hero, held a Congressional Medal of Honor for his services in World War I, the founder of the OSS. In essence, what kind of a figure was this?

ANTONY CAVE BROWN: It's very difficult to describe Donovan because, of course, he was all things to all men. But one thing that struck me during the 3 1/2 years that I took to do the biography was that he was an heroic figure. The Irish, in seeking an explanation for him, thought that he was a throwback to the high Irish kings, the great warrior, the great statesman, a man of wisdom, a man who is intolerable, impossible, and yet brilliant. He seemed to be everything, the man with the golden tongue.

UTLEY: And he gets things done.

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BROWN: He got things done.

UTLEY: Mr. Colby, when you look at Bill Donovan, not just the heroic figure, but what he actually did and accomplished, what's the importance of this man? Why should we be interested in him?

WILLIAM COLBY: Well, the importance of him is that he began the American experiment in developing an intelligence service. And he did one of the most innovative things that's ever been done about it. He put at the center of it, what we call central intelligence, scholarship, knowledge, understanding of foreign situations. Not just the spy business, not just picking up little bits and pieces, but putting it together and thinking about it and what it means.

UTLEY: He did lay the groundwork for that, certainly. But also, weren't many of his recruits, as we've just seen, what you might call socialite spies, friends, buddies from the Eastern club, and weren't they really amateurs?

COLBY: He had every kind. He had low-class people and high-class people. I was a nobody at that time and I worked for him. There were other people just like it.

Sure he had some high-level one, because it was an attractive new kind of a profession. And in Washington it's always the new thing that attracts the elite of our country.

UTLEY: Mr. Brown, in the very lengthy research you carried out, you come to a number of conclusions, but one of them is that there were a large number of failures, as well as successes, in the OSS. What was the essential problem it faced, starting up a new intelligence agency, fighting the Nazis in Europe during the war?

BROWN: Well, of course, fundamentally, there was no trained cadre of intelligence personnel, skilled and used to the world outside the frontiers of the United States. I think that was the first point.

The second point was that, of course, people who knew anything about -- most of the people who knew anything about the world outside had already been recruited into other intelligence departments.

And the third and most important point, I think, is that the enemy was resourceful and determined. And you had people drawn from the counting houses, from the insurance agencies, from the lawyers' offices who quite suddenly found themselves confronted with an intricate and remorseless enemy.

The Second World War was noted for its ideological intricacies. And quite often this was beyond the intellectual capacities of some of the people who were thrown into the battle at the early stages of it.

But I must add this in regard to these well-known disasters that appear in my book. That after a certain stage, after 1944, the OSS developed a very high degree of proficiency. But, of course, that proficiency wasn't obtained overnight, and certainly not until a large number of men had been bloodied.

UTLEY: What kinds of operations were carried out? Mr. Colby, you did it, you parachuted into Europe.

COLBY: We had every kind of intelligence operations. Allen Dulles ran a spy into the middle of Berlin. I was parachuted into the mountains of Norway. Friends of mine were dropped into northern Vietnam to work with Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese. All sorts of operations of that sort. A large army was assembled in northern Burma.

UTLEY: Were losses high?

COLBY: Not as high as you might think. If you add the total, the actual losses were a fairly small percentage, and probably considerably less than a normal infantry division would suffer.

UTLEY: Was the OSS ever penetrated, vulnerable to the other side?

COLBY: They had their problems with agents and double agents and all the rest of it. If you're engaged in a high-risk operation, like trying to get into an enemy country, you're going to have losses, you're going to have deceptions. That's part of the business. You have to accept that, just as you accept the loss of the first wave of Marines on Iwo Jima.

UTLEY: And riding over all of this was Bill Donovan, this charismatic figure, this last hero, as you call him in the title of your book. When you look at his legacy and what has followed, the CIA, central intelligence, it raises the question, can we have in our democratic, open society a very effective intelligence service operating worldwide? Mr. Brown?

BROWN: Well, I'm inclined to think not. Donovan toyed with the idea of introducing the American version of the British Official Secrets Act in order to protect the workings of the Central Intelligence Agency. And it seems to me that it's virtually impossible for -- it's essential that a secret service be secret in order to be effective.

UTLEY: And you can't do that in an open society.

BROWN: And you cannot do that in an open society.

However, I do recognize this critical point, that it would be unconstitutional to introduce an Official Secrets Act in this country.

UTLEY: Mr. Colby, as a former head of the CIA, can we have both, an open society and a CIA, an effective intelligence service?

COLBY: I think we end up with a stronger one, frankly. The elitist aspect of the total secrecy is what got the British service into a great deal of trouble, with some major penetrations who just were never questioned because they came from the right universities. We have not had that kind of an experience in our service.

I think we get strengths out of our American system that more than compensate for the problems and limitations.

UTLEY: Gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us. We're talking about Wild Bill Donovan, the source, the man who started it all.